

A House with a View.

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A HOUSE WITH A HISTORY.

COL. ROGER MORRIS'

FINE OLD MANSION.

THE BIOGRAPHY OF ONE OF THE OLDEST RESIDENCES ON MANHATTAN ISLAND—FORFEITED TO THE STATE, A SOURCE OF PROFIT TO THE ASTORS, AND STILL STANDING TO TELL ITS STORY.

It is a treat to see a house occasionally that is a little different from its neighbors. One that has not a brown-stone front and high brown-stone steps, and a brown-stone railing, and a brown-stone area, and the face of a brown-stone servant girl looking out of the basement window. There are a few houses in New York that were not cast in this mould, but very few; and whenever we see one it is a relief to the eyes to stop and look at it. If it happens to be a very old house, with one or two walls a little out of plumb and big dormer windows on the roof, so much the better, for then it brings a suggestion of big, airy rooms and other luxuries our ancestors enjoyed before what we call the "modern conveniences" were invented. These modern conveniences consist, in very large part, of rooms a trifle larger than lock-boxes in the Post-office, entries whose narrowness is equaled only by their shortness, and five or six families trying to live in the space that would com-

fortably hold one. We see so few fine old-fashioned places in New York that we are more likely than most people to appreciate one when we do find it. The old homes of nearly all the wealthy old families have gone to the dogs. Some have been torn down, some have been changed into apartment houses, some are business places. There is hardly one left just as it stood half a century ago. The thing we are most accustomed to is the flimsy house that was put up yesterday, and that will be pulled down tomorrow to make room for a larger. In this uncomfortable and unsettled state of affairs he is a benefactor who discovers a real stately old mansion, standing to-day just as it stood nearly a century ago, inside and out, with no changes but those made by old Time. So much the better if the mansion is one known to history, and if its broad rooms have sheltered men whose names we venerate. There is at least one such mansion still standing in New York—standing now just as it stood in the days we read about in history, filled up to the very throat with furniture of the last century, that loses nothing by comparison with our own, overflowing with bric-a-brac, the walls hidden with paintings. Better than all, still occupied by the same family that owned it when Canal street was a very good street, but rather too far up town.

If celebrity had the same bad effect upon houses that it has upon some men, this rare old house would stretch itself up several feet higher and refuse to have anything to do with its neighbors. But it does not. It is as modest as it is grand and stately ; as kindly and inviting as some fine old gentlemen with cut-away coat and gray locks ; so secure in its social position that it does not need to humiliate everything around it to make its own greatness felt. It is a house with a history. No story of the Revolution is complete without a mention of it. When New York was not much more than a big town, it stood just where it stands now. George Washington once lived in it, in those stormy times, and laid his plans of battle. Many men whose names are part of the history of the Republic have eaten in its big din-

ing-room, danced on its smooth parlor floor, and slept in its airy chambers. In its drawing-room a hundred Indians have stood, dressed in all the wild grandeur of their native costume, and consulted with the great chief of the pale-faces. Then when the war was over, and the cannon were left out in the fields to rust, the fine old house became a place of public entertainment. The man who started the first line of stages from New York to Boston turned it into a hotel, and advertised that the octagon room in which the Indians had assembled was "very happily calculated for a turtle party." Confiscated by the Government, the old house, by a wonderful combination of circumstances, had a good deal to do with getting together the nucleus of the great Astor fortune. Then it went into the hands of a wealthy French merchant, who brightened up its rusty parts and made it once more a fine private residence. This merchant took a ship over to France, loaded it down with fine furniture and paintings, with young trees, and with everything he could buy, to ornament his house and grounds. Some of the furniture came out of French palaces, and is quite as grand and costly as the finest that can be bought at the present day. This furniture still stands in the big parlor and drawing-room, these pictures still hang upon the walls, and these trees are still growing in the spacious grounds. The house stands on the summit of Harlem Heights. For many years it was known as the Roger Morris house, but it is more familiar to us as the Jumel mansion.

The grounds about this grand old place are full of fruit trees, and when the writer first visited them, one warm day in spring, they were all in blossom. They looked like so many great snowballs, and smelled like vast bunches of violets. By the side of the house some of Mme. Jumel's descendants were amusing themselves with archery. Where the apple blossoms and the new green leaves did not hide everything from sight, there were delightful views. New York City lies at the foot of this hill; the Harlem River flows beside it; not far away is the Sound, and Brooklyn can be seen, and some of the Long Island towns.

But however grand the view may be, it is not the view that is the chief attraction of the place. It is easy to imagine on these bright spring days a warm spring afternoon, and the crowded people in the city jostling each other in their efforts to reach fresh air and sunshine and quiet. Out of this hubbub, out from the shadows of high brick walls, out of the crush and bustle and busy racket of the City, to walk suddenly into this yard of some acres' extent, with apple blossoms and blue sky overhead, with soft green grass under foot, with not a sound to be heard except the laughter of the archers on the lawn ; with nobody to crowd you, nobody to disturb you, the delightful spring perfume to soothe you, is about as near fairyland as anything to be found on Manhattan Island. With all this luxury outside it takes a pretty good interior not to be disappointing. But there is nothing disappointing there. The house is one of those broad, two-story buildings that used to be fashionable, but now take up too much room to be profitable. It is built of wood, and painted white. Nobody who has ever visited the upper part of the City, on the West Side, can fail to have seen it. It stands on the top of a high hill and can be seen for miles. Go up the West Side elevated railroad to the last station, and, when you leave the platform, look to the north-west, and it is the highest, largest, most prominent house you see. It has a slanting roof, with dormer windows, and a flat space on top, around which is a substantial railing. From this place on top of the house there is hardly any prominent object on Manhattan Island that cannot be seen. At the front is a large portico, about half the width of the house. The roof of this portico covers both the first and second stories, and is supported by four tall pillars. The casing of the front door is handsomely carved and embellished, and immediately over it, at the second story, is another door, instead of a window, that opens upon a balcony. In the rear is an octagonal wing, the lower story of which is the drawing-room. The whole place is as quiet as if it stood on the summit of the Adirondack's, though it is only five minutes walk from an elevated railroad station.

Entering by the broad front door, the visitor is in a spacious hall filled with curious and useful articles, its walls covered with old paintings. There, on the left, hangs a life-size portrait of Mme. Jumel, a little girl standing by her side. There are many other family portraits, all done by the foremost artists of that time. Here, on the right, near the door, is a tiny table, its top handsomely inlaid. On this little stand a celebrated but unorthodox writer wrote the best-known of all his books. Above the arch, at the rear of the hall, is something that looks like the American coat-of-arms, and yet does not look like it. It is all complete, with the exception of the eagle. It was bought in Paris, when it was not safe to parade an eagle over one's door-tops. So the eagle was taken out, and the remainder of the ornament, with some little device substituted, was put where it still remains. To the left, on entering the hallway, is the door leading to the parlor. This is a large room, handsomely furnished, and the walls are ornamented with the works of some of the old masters. The furniture is of mahogany, and the carpet still in a good state of preservation, though it has lain so many years, and been trod by several generations. Everything in this room is in the style of half a century or more ago, except a few paintings that have been added. They have a more modern appearance, for the style of paintings changes, as well as other styles. At the end of the corridor a folding-door opens into the drawing-room, which is on the first floor of the octagon extension. Here, too, is all the old furniture just as it stood many years ago, including a number of articles that people of the present generation would hardly know the use of. The chairs and sofas, all brought from Paris, are upholstered in delicate light satin, and, with their mahogany frames, are almost as good now as when they were first made. At several points little plaster angels hang from the ceiling, supported by invisible wires. It was in this room that Washington held a consultation with the Indian chiefs. It is safe to suppose that he felt relieved when he bowed the last one out and locked the door,

for they were none too friendly. They entered the house without any invitation, so the story goes, and it was at first thought that their intentions were hostile. But they said they only wanted to "have a talk with the great chief." The dining-room of this Morris or Jumel mansion is one of its most attractive parts. Indeed, the dining-room of any house is an attractive place to a man with a well-regulated interior; but this one is particularly interesting. It is a room that would set a collector of bric-a-brac and rare china wild with delight. A very large room, it has windows on two sides—the front and the east. It is on the right-hand side of the hallway upon entering the house. The back end of the room is entirely taken up with a great old-fashioned mahogany sideboard almost big enough for a modern house. There is no new-fangled Frenchified buffet about that; it is a genuine old-time sideboard, every inch of it. And every bit of its top and every one of its many shelves is loaded down with rare pieces of plate, tall silver ornaments, and scores of pieces of decorated chinaware. Many of these choice bits have a history. Not a few of them are, in one way or another, connected with distinguished men, and could tell interesting stories if they could be induced to talk. One side of the dining-room, the side nearest the entry, is filled by a mahogany stand, made up of half a dozen or more shelves. And every one of these shelves is as full as it can hold with pretty pieces of plate and china, all old and rare. The big mahogany dining table, in the centre of the room, is both broad and long. It may be that the present mistress of the establishment, who, with great kindness, pointed out the historical treasures of the place to the writer, will not thank him for giving to the public a minute description of her household arrangements, but pretty things certainly ought to be admired, and many people who cannot look at this rare old house with their own eyes may take pleasure in looking at it through somebody else's.

This mansion stands on some of the highest ground on Manhattan Island. It is not far from the Hudson, but

that river is not visible on account of the intervening high land. The Harlem River, however, may be seen from any part of the grounds, almost its entire length, from above High Bridge, down below Randall's Island. Roger Morris, the original owner of the house, was a younger son of Charles Morris, of Wandsworth, England, and was born in 1727. He became prominent in America in 1764 as an aide on the staff of Gen. Braddock, and was wounded in the attack upon Fort Duquesne. He was an intimate acquaintance of George Washington before the Revolution. He married Mary Phillipse, a sister of Mrs. Beverly Robinson, and heiress, in her own right, of 50,000 acres of land. The wedding was celebrated at the Phillipsburg Manor-house, in March, 1758. In 1764 he settled in this historic house, which was then "near New York." Washington made this house his head-quarters during the active campaign on the upper part of Manhattan Island. "After the enemy had taken possession of the first American line," a historian writes, "things remained quiet for an hour or two. In this interval, Gen. Washington, with Gens. Greene, Putnam, Mercer, and other principal officers, came over the North River from Fort Lee, and crossed the island to the Morris House, whence they viewed the position of our troops and the operations of the enemy in that quarter." The British troops soon afterward took possession of the very spot on which Washington and his officers had stood. Some accounts say that they had not been gone more than fifteen minutes. Washington's last visit to this house, during the war, was on the 16th of September, 1776. He visited it under more pleasant and peaceful circumstances several years later. When the capture of Fort Washington resulted in the whole island falling into the hands of the British, the Hessians encamped on Harlem Heights, and Gen. Knyphausen, their commander, used the Morris House as his headquarters; and it continued to be so used by the Hessians and the British till the day of the evacuation of the island—Nov. 25, 1783. Notwithstanding its long occupation by the military, it was still considered "a

desirable residence." For a short time after the Revolution it was occupied by Dr. Isaac Ledyard. In June, 1785, Talmage Hall, who had just started a line of stages from New York to Boston, starting from the old City Tavern, at Broadway and Thames Street, leased the building and opened it as a hotel, making it the first stopping-place on his line, and inviting parties from the city to visit it. The act of attainer, passed by the New York Legislature in 1779, included, among those named, Col. Robert Morris and his wife. When the British evacuated this city, Col. Morris and his wife went to England, where they spent the remainder of their lives. Col. Morris died on the 13th of September, 1794, at the age of 67 years, and his wife survived him many years, living till July, 1825, when she was 96 years old. It was not till after her death that the old question of the attainer act, and its effect upon her heirs, came up. It was claimed, on the part of the heirs, that there had been a secret ante-nuptial settlement, which could not be affected by the act of attainer. John Jacob Astor bought the claims of the heirs, and it is said that he made \$500,000 by the speculation. Col. Morris's plate and furniture had been sold long before this, in 1793, in this City, under the direction of the Commissioners of Forfeiture. As a reward for his loyalty to the Crown, Col. Morris received compensation from the British Government for all his losses. When Gen. Washington visited New York, in 1790, after his election to the Presidency, he once more visited the old Morris house, and made this entry in his diary, under date of Saturday, July 10 : "Having formed a party, consisting of the Vice-President, his lady and son and Miss Smith, the Secretaries of State, Treasury, and War, and the ladies of the two latter, with all the gentlemen of my family, Mrs. Lear, and the two children, we visited the old position of Fort Washington, and afterward dined on a dinner provided by Mr. Marriner, at the house lately of Col. Roger Morris, but confiscated, and in the occupation of a common farmer." After going through several hands, the house was sold to Stephen

Jumel, who, at his death, left it to his widow, Mme. Jumel, and her descendants still live on the property. After Stephen Jumel's death Mme. Jumel married Aaron Burr. Burr thus became interested in an estate that lay hardly more than a gun-shot away from Hamilton Grange, the country seat of Hamilton. In 1834, the oldest living son of Hamilton, by a conveyance made to him in 1834, by Madame Jumel, in which she is described as Eliza B. Burr, wife of Aaron Burr, became interested in the property on which Burr and his wife then resided, and by a subsequent deed, conveyed it to a trustee for her benefit for life, and upon her death to go to her niece and adopted daughter, Mary, afterwards the wife of Nelson Chase.

Upon her death, in 1865, there began a series of the most remarkable lawsuits in legal annals, to obtain possession of the property from the children of her niece, Mary, who were then in possession of the property. After a period of about fifteen years, and the expenditure of upwards of \$300,000 in legal expenses, the claimants were defeated and the title firmly established. In 1880 a partition suit was brought, in which all the persons having any interest, or claiming any interest, were made parties. By consent of all the parties, judgment was rendered by the Supreme Court, in June, 1881, directing a sale at public auction, and distribution of the proceeds.

By virtue of the judgment of the Supreme Court, rendered on the sixth day of June, 1881, in the action of partition brought by William Inglis Chase against Nelson Chase and others, all the property of the estate unsold, consisting of the mansion, together with the tract of land surrounding it, containing 783 city lots, and lying between

159th street, St. Nicholas avenue, Kingsbridge Road; 175th street, High Bridge Park, and Croton Aqueduct ; also, the upland east of the aqueduct, north of 159th street, and water lots having a front along the Harlem River of about 4,000 feet, containing about 400 city lots, together with the pre-emptive right to the land under water, in front thereof, extending out to the new bulkhead line, or River street, containing about the same area, and also premises Nos. 150 Broadway, 71 and 73 Liberty street, will be sold at public auction at the Merchants' Exchange Salesroom, No. 111 Broadway, New York, on the thirty-first day of May, 1882, at 12 o'clock, and continued on each succeeding day until all the property is sold.

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